

ALUMNI



Mary A. Hallaren, ULowell alumna and retired colonel of the U.S. Women's Army Corps. was still on active duty when this 1950 photo was taken.



# MARY A. HALLAREN

*LITTLE  
COLONEL*



*"BOSS OF THE  
LADIES LEGION"*

*Mary A. Hallaren*



**M**ary Hallaren didn't join the ranks of tearful women sending their husbands off to World War II—she joined the army and the men on their journey across the Atlantic.

But long before 1942, the 35-year-old school teacher was atypical of her generation. While her contemporaries were raising children and keeping house, she was spending her summers hitchhiking across America and backpacking in Alaska, Mexico and Palestine.

So it was not surprising when the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps was established, Hallaren was one of the first to enlist.

"They paid me to do the kind of thing I used to do for fun on my own," recalled Hallaren, a 1927 graduate of the Lowell Normal School, one of the predecessors to the University of Lowell.

"When they said women could go into the Women's Army Corps, that was the most direct kind of service. It was something new and different... and I was always interested in what was on the other side of the mountain."

During a distinguished military career which spanned 18 years and two wars, Hallaren attained the rank of colonel, became director of the Women's Army Corps (auxiliary was dropped in 1942) and helped spearhead the drive which ended when women became part of the regular army.

The Office of Military History states, "It was largely due to her (Mary Hallaren's) vision, courage and dedicated service that the Women's Army Corps attained permanent status and to her leadership that it carried out its mission successfully during the Korean War."

But Hallaren downplays her decision to voluntarily give up the comfort and security of home for a war zone.

"When a war is on, you don't think much about it, you're doing a job," she said.

Hallaren was one of the first women to be selected as an officer candidate, graduating from the First WAC Officer Candidate Class at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, in August 1942. Three months later, she was appointed executive officer and later commanding officer in the first WAC Separate Battalion—which in July 1943 arrived in Scotland under her command as the first WAC unit in the European Theater of Operations in World War II.

## Newsweek



**Hallaren graces the cover of Newsweek in May 1951 for the ninth anniversary of the Women's Army Corps.**

Less than five years after joining the Women's Army Corps Hallaren was promoted to colonel—at the time the highest rank possible for a woman. In 1947, she was appointed director of the corps, a position she held for six years—longer than any other director. Through her efforts during a two-year campaign, the WACs were integrated into the regular Army and the reserve via passage of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948. She served in the Office of Personnel, U.S. European Command, Frankfurt, Germany, and as operations officer in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense prior to her retirement on June 30, 1960.

She is one of the most decorated members of the corps, having received a raft of honors including the Legion of Merit with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Bronze Star with one Cluster, French Croix de Guerre avec Vermeil, Army Commendation Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Legion D'Honneur and WAC Service Medal.

She even made the cover of *Newsweek* Magazine on May 21, 1951, as the "Boss of the Ladies' Legion" for an article about the ninth birthday of the Women's Army Corps.

Despite her diminutive size, which at barely five-feet tall earned her the nickname of the "little colonel," Hallaren established herself as a feisty achiever early in her career. As expected, there was resistance in the 1940s to the "gentle sex" getting involved in the military.

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Hallaren reflects on her past in a 1986 interview with the Army's Stars and Stripes magazine.



"One man in the army said, 'If you could hear what the men are saying...' I said, 'if I could hear what they were saying, I'd jolly well change their minds,'" she recalled.

But that spirit was established well before her days in the Army. The eldest of six children who grew up in Lowell in the 1910s and 1920s, Hallaren dreamed of going to medical school. But the family could not afford that pursuit so she entered the teaching program at the Lowell Normal School.

"I remember one of the teachers said, 'I want you to remember at all times that standing up in front of a classroom is no place for a timid soul.' I don't think I needed that advice," she said.

She also was told by George Aiken, the then governor of Vermont and later senator who gave her her first ride on her first hitchhiking tour across country, that she "had rocks in her head."

"I made up my mind I was going to see the 48 states," she said.

She did that and more, spending 15 summers on walking tours of this country and many others with a 15-pound pack on her back. She lectured about her travels, which included roaming the Canadian forests, exploring little-known paths of Alaska and crossing the Andes on a pack pony. Many of her travels

were detailed in the local newspaper.

Hallaren said she "loved" teaching for 15 years, specializing in remedial reading during her tenure at elementary and junior high schools. She feels that training helped prepare her for addressing thousands of soldiers after she entered the Army.

Retirement from the Army 27 years ago did not breed inactivity in Hallaren. She soon completed a bachelor's degree from George Washington University and took graduate courses at Boston University and Harvard. She took on the job of executive director of Women in Community Service Inc. for the U.S. Department of Labor for 13 years, leaving in 1978 at the age of 71.

And now, despite having celebrated her 80th birthday, Hallaren continues to look and act like a woman much younger. Living 15 minutes from Washington, D.C., in Arlington, Va., she continues to do speaking engagements and this year traveled to Australia and Germany. She also has hopes of visiting one of the few places on this world which she has not seen—the South Pole.

"I can't say anything I wanted to do I haven't had a chance to do. I think if you set your mind on a goal, you usually hit it," she said. "My mother lived until 91. She traveled. I hope I can do the same thing."